

## Me? An Evangelist? - Sermon #3: What Do I Say?

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Romans 10:11-15

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Today we continue our series on evangelism. If you remember, the first week we talked about what it takes to be an evangelist, and we came up with only one requirement: be yourself! Last week, we came up with an impact list of people we could pray for and hopefully help develop a relationship with God. That list could be made up of people we know, people we used to know, people we'd like to know, and even people we don't know yet!

Today, we're going to discuss what I think is the hardest part of evangelism: what do we say to these people? Paul tells us that those who bring the good news have beautiful feet. I don't know about you, but I want to have beautiful feet. I know that you want to have beautiful feet, too. I want us to share the Good News of Jesus in such a way that Community Christian Church becomes known as the church of the beautiful feet.

But what do we say? When we have the chance to tell someone about God or the church, how do we do that? Where do we start? I believe this is a major stumbling block for a lot of people. They know someone they'd like to invite to church, but they just don't know the right words to say. What's the right vocabulary to use? How do you bring up the subject without sounding like a fanatical cult member? And what if that person asks a question like, "Sure, I'll come to your church...if you can name the twelve disciples" or "How does your church explain the book of Revelation?" What do we do then? Sometimes our fear of what might – or might not – happen keeps us from exercising our beautiful feet.

But Paul says that our worry should not be about what will happen if we talk to the person, but what could happen if we don't talk to them. He asks, "How can these people have a relationship with God if they don't believe? And how can they believe in someone they haven't heard about it? And how can they hear about God without someone telling them about him?" It's not our responsibility to convert someone or make them have faith. Remember, evangelism has a 100% success rate, because all we're called to do is share what we know. Then it's up to God. But what we know is so glorious that we should be compelled to share it, because there are people who need to hear it.

Before we start doing any talking, there's something else we must do first. When I teach public speaking the very first lecture I give isn't on how to write a speech or delivery or anything like that. It's on listening. Listening is crucial if you want to be heard, simply because people are more willing to listen to you when you've first listened to them. We want people to know we care about them, we are interested in them. When's the last time someone sat down and really listened to you? How did that make you feel? Listening to someone is often the greatest gift we can give them.

It's also important to listen first because what we hear may give us clues as to how to make the invitation. There are a lot of people out there who have left the church for a number of reasons. My friend Kevin, who I mentioned last week, is one of those. He had a bad church experience earlier in life, and hasn't been back to church since. Before anyone like Kevin will step foot in another church, they need to be able to tell that story

and share those feelings. Only after they've done that will they be open to giving church another chance and make a new start.

We may get other helpful clues from listening first, and those clues may help us tailor our invitation. For example, if you notice that a new couple in the neighborhood has young children, you may want to mention Sunday School or VBS to them. If you know a person who lives alone, you can tell them about the great sense of community we share here. If a person talks about their lack of church experience, you can talk about how we're informal and laidback and welcoming. If they mention they have kids in college, tell them about Cookie Sunday! Listening first will greatly enhance what you say later.

Once we listen, then we can begin thinking and praying about what we might say. We won't all say the same thing. Evangelism isn't about spouting the party line. That's a pet peeve I have about telemarketers: "Good evening Mr...Wilkerson, I am excited to tell you that you have been selected out of thousands of applicants to receive a glorious, fun-filled trip to Jamaica just for you..." Wow, how can I turn that down when you make it sound so exciting? Every person they talk to gets the same *spiel*, and none of them believe it, because it's so cold and impersonal.

So this morning, I'm not going to hand you a script and say, "Now, march your beautiful feet on out of here and read this to everyone you see." That won't work. The message you share with others must be sincere, honest, personal, and from the heart. So the real answer to the question: "What do I say?" is this: you tell your story.

I know you have a story. We all have stories about how we came to know Christ, about how we were invited and welcomed into a church family, this church family. We all have stories about what God has done in our lives. I said in the first sermon in this series that people looking for a church want something real. Nothing is more real, or more powerful, than telling our story, because your story is God's story.

You might say, "But isn't the Bible God's story?" Yes, it is. But do you think God stopped working when the last book of the Bible was written? Was God's work done at that point? Of course not! God is still working today, and you are living proof of that. Your story is one example of God's saving, healing, and powerful work on this earth. Evangelism is witnessing to what we know through our faith and experience, and there's nothing we know more about than our story.

Your story is basically the answer to these questions: Why do you come to church? What's difference has church made in your life? What has God done in your life to make you the person you are? What is God still doing? What's one thing you would miss if you didn't go to church? What's one time in your life when God felt very real to you? That's your story, and I guarantee you it's a powerful one.

So how does your story find its way into conversation? Introducing this may feel awkward, but there are some natural ways to do it without coming across as pushy or aggressive. For example, when someone asks you, "How are you doing?" you could say, "Wonderful! The family's good, work is going well, church has been really great." Or when someone asks about your plans for the weekend, you could say, "We're doing this on Friday night, and that on Saturday, and then we'll meet up with our friends at church on Sunday morning." Or if someone asks about a difficult time you've been going through, and you can say this honestly, talk about how God and the church have loved and supported you. People share the same struggles and hardships and difficult decisions

that you do. You have a real source of love and hope in your life that other people need to know about.

In the situations I just mentioned, notice that nothing that was said required a response from the other person. You're not putting them on the spot or forcing them to make a decision. You're simply telling your story.

Now, we have to be prepared for a couple things: first, a person may already have a church home, to which we say "Hallelujah!" This is not a competition. Another thing we have to be ready for is for people to not respond. And that's just fine. "No" is perfectly acceptable. Jesus told his disciples in our first reading, "If someone says no, move on to the next one." How many times did you say "No" to church before you said "Yes?" The time may not be right for them; they may not be at the right place in their lives. We can still pray for them, and trust that God will continue to work on their hearts through us or through others.

The response we can pray for is that the person you're talking with will, at some point in your relationship, follow up your statements with the magic words: "Your church seems to be really important to you. Why is that?" Ah, music to an evangelist's ears! And then you just do what comes naturally, you tell your story.

You're not on your own in doing this. God loves and supports you, and the church wants to support you, as well. In just a minute, as we collect the offering, you're each going to be given a business card. This card has some of the basic information about the church on it: ministers, service times, website address. This card is not yours to keep. Your assignment is to give this card away to someone. Then, come get another one. We have plenty more.

There are no scripts I can give you today, no magic words that will bring people to church. But you don't need my words; you already have your own. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You have a story to tell, a story about love and forgiveness and finding a home. Go and tell your story.